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THE POTENTIALITY OF IMAGINATION IN MIKEL DUFRENNE'S PHILOSOPHY

I have yet to explain what part the indirect imaginary has in this gulf of the fantastic, by which I mean the images supplied by culture, whether this be mass culture or any other kind of tradition. This leads to another question: What will be the future of the individual imagination in what is usually called the "civilization of the image"? Will the power of evoking images of things that are not there continue to develop in a human race increasingly inundated by a flood of prefabricated images?
(I. Calvino, *Visibility*, in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*)

In our culture, which Calvino has properly defined many years ago as a "civilization of the image", philosophers have to reflect about the range imagination could have nowadays. The sentence I choose to start this paper, but also the title of the whole collection *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, would be a suggestion to present a problem which the contemporary society can't be more sensitive to: the power of images and the possibilities enclosed in them. Even if the text belongs to the last past century, it's oriented toward the new era anticipating in many ways urgent questions the philosophy is dealing with.

Also the problem of imagination in this age has increasly to do with another concept: the virtuality. Even if virtuality has many shades and applications nowadays and often the term has become misused in everyday life, we can say that the virtual describes the boundary between the real and the unreal. However it's necessary to distinguish at least two different ways in which virtual participates in our experience: at first "virtual" indicates an illusory and fictional character of something, think about the so-called virtual reality¹; but at the same time it indicates also a potentiality of the real, a dimension that increases the real world.

¹«Virtual Reality is a high-end user-computer interface that involves realtime stimulation and interaction through multiple sensorial channels. These sensorial modalities are visual, auditory, tactile, smell and taste» (Burdea, Coiffet 1993, 3). There are a lot of definitions of

In tempore non suspecto, Mikel Dufrenne gets to talk about the virtual and its connection to the imagination operations. His whole production is crossed by the study about the role and the range of this faculty, most of all in contrast to Jean-Paul Sartre point of view, who in the same years dedicates many texts to the topic. In his first works imagination has a marginal role, but gradually Dufrenne begins a careful recovery of the functions of imagination and in the following texts he confers it an essential increasing significance. At the end of his career he goes so far as to speak about virtual as the final concept to name the imaginary dimension in the world of experience.

The analysis I propose is exactly about the opposition between the two faces of imagination, as illusion and as a productive and receptive sense, and aims to reveal a concept of virtuality near to the idea of potentiality, a notion that can't be developed without the reflection about the role and the potentiality also of imagination. Let's see briefly the development of these notions along Dufrenne's main works.

The *Phenomenology of aesthetic experience*, his main work, is dedicated most of all to the analysis of the fruition of artworks starting from a subjective experience². Here imagination is brought into play in the second phase of aesthetic experience, the representation, where its role is uniquely to convert the material acquired into visible. It has the task to prearrange the image as the artist presented it, without adding nothing else, without being productive. In short, imagination is just a power of visibility that helps to build the object, a sort of transcendental function similar to the role it has in the Kantian aesthetic theory: «But even though imagination intervenes here, as in all perception, to stabilize the

“virtual reality” due also to the fact that nowadays technologies develop an increasing number of devices able to expand the ordinary world experience more and more. Most of these definitions are in the middle of philosophy and sciences, and involve both the domains.

² Mikel Dufrenne must be considered the first who carries on the aesthetic phenomenological research in the French circle, starting from his earliest work *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* published in 1953. The philosopher chooses to analyse the perceptive aspects of the artistic fruition, following an experiential approach. Considering the contemporary progression of art, Dufrenne develops a system of thinking that overturns the concept of work of art compared with the canons of contemporary French aesthetics and conceives a theory rescuing the disoriented spectator. To analyse artworks as perception of aesthetic objects means thus not just describing the process through which the spectator perceives an artwork beyond his structural conceptualisations, but also giving it meaning and value starting exactly from the subject perception. Cfr. Dufrenne 1953.

represented object, its operation remains a modest one. It does not inspire images which pretend to enrich perception but in fact encumber it, nor does it attain the imaginary» (Dufrenne 1953, 360).

So here imagination as a productive faculty is put to the rest and that's because it's still felt as an ambiguous and dangerous faculty. In this part of his thought, Dufrenne is largely influenced by the ideas of Alain and Sartre. In fact according to Alain, one of the most important Dufrenne mentor, imagination produces mistakes and fallacies and it's the opposite of a correct perception³. The analysis of imagination in the aesthetic experience is also influenced by the comparison with Sartre's point of view. The positions of the two philosophers are incompatible: the breaking point is the Sartrian postulation that defines imagination and perception as two different attributes of the consciousness, excluding each other necessarily: «[...] for the image and the perception, far from being two elementary psychical factors of similar quality and which simply enter into different combinations, represent the two main irreducible attitudes of consciousness. It follows that they exclude each other» (Sartre 1940, 171). Above all imagination can't flow into a power able to unrealize, that is something that brings the subject outside the domain of experience and perception.

So imagination is kept for now in its transcendental function. However it's considered a fundamental faculty and is not a coincidence that Dufrenne places it in the middle of the aesthetic experience, between the first step (presence) and the last one (sentiment and reflection). It allows the passage from sensation to thought, because it embodies the passage where consciousness come into being, detaching the subject from the mere presence and making him able to experience through space and time, just before becoming theoretical. For this reason I like to define imagination in Dufrenne theory as an existential faculty: in its duality (as transcendental and as empirical) it situates the human being in the world, giving him his own mode of existence, that is the representation: «In this way it [imagination] assumes a depth significance: [...] it avoids somehow the faculties' register, it is the ontological event that founds the human being instead of being

³ Cfr. Alain 1920.

founded by him, and through which Being shows itself to a subject» (Dufrenne 1966, 103-04)⁴.

A different role is designed in *Le poétique*, a text published for the first time in 1963. This work is a sort of *unicum* in Dufrenne production, because it's something in-between a literal and a philosophical work. Imagination is in fact involved in the fruition of poetry: the words of a poem must assume an imaginative guise. Imagination earns here a kind of freedom and a consequent autonomy, therefore – in a positive way – to imagine is conceived as «to let oneself guide by images» (Franzini 1982, 71).

So imagination in its generative ability doesn't endanger us in this case: its work in poetry is fundamental and the philosopher is obliged to be less careful and to give it more room. In the fruition of poetry imagination creates images *ex nihilo*, starting just from words. The author seems to recover the etymological significance of *poiesis*, conferring on images a sort of power to evoke or to create sense. Consequently imagination becomes the capacity of the subject to grasp this sense which images are pregnant with. But this sense doesn't merely come from the poet's individual creativity, these images – Dufrenne claims – come from Nature, as an indistinct ground the poet is able to communicate with. What Nature represents in Dufrenne theory is not easy to tell in a few words and it would require a long speech. Anyway the core of his idea is the separation between a *Natura naturans* and a *natura naturata*, based on the noted Spinoza's distinction. In a nutshell, the Nature, written with a capital letter, signifies a sort of pre-real that is realized in the visible nature, written in lower case: a sort of Being that reveals itself in the visible world.

Thus the poet seems to have a special sensibility more than others: «To be inspired is to be sensitive to these images; to communicate with the ground in a prehistory where the unit isn't broken yet; to free these images fixing them into the words they evoke; to open a world where the reader can penetrate» (Dufrenne 1963, 136)⁵. So the reader recovers and recognizes the im-

⁴«Et dans cette mesure, elle revêt une signification profonde: elle n'est plus seulement cette affinité mystérieuse avec le cosmos que célèbre la poésie, elle échappe en quelque sorte au registre des facultés, elle est l'événement ontologique qui fonde l'homme plutôt qu'elle n'est fondée en lui, et par lequel l'être se révèle à un sujet».

⁵«Être inspiré, c'est être sensible à ces images; se tenir en communication avec le fond dans une protohistoire où l'unité n'est pas encore rompu; délivrer ces images en les fixant dans les mots qu'elles appellent; ouvrir par là un monde où le lecteur à son tour puisse pénétrer».

ages the poet has translate into verses coming from the very same dimension: Nature (which the author called also “mother of images”). The reader recognizes the general form of these images, that is the *substantial* continuity between his own experience and the poet’s one. Hence in *Le poétique* imagination and image assume a fundamental role not just for comprehending artistic products, but also to discover this primordial dimension, that is Nature. So imagination becomes *le trait d’union* between man and an other dimension, not immediately visible which through the medium of poetry – through its images – becomes a quasi-perceived.

In *L’inventaire des a priori* published in 1981 imagination has a new and bigger range compared to the previous works: through it the subject becomes able to gather a not intelligible sense in his perceptive experience. So imagination has to do with «an other dimension of the object, the possible surrounding the reality with an halo» (Dufrenne 1981a, 112). The task of imagination in the subject experience of the world is to make the subject feel the sense of images instead of creating them: it becomes more clearly an actual faculty, able to perceive a sense, as a kind of specification of perception.

We have spoken about imagination and images so far, but there is another important term that makes Dufrenne able to develop the passage from imagination to virtuality: the imaginary. In a short paper entitled *La “sensibilité génératrice”* dedicated to the philosophy of Raymond Bayer, raises a positive and productive vision of imaginary. In fact in the previous works the notion was conceived – according to Sartre’s vision – as something disconnected from reality and as a product of an unrealizing consciousness. In this paper Dufrenne combines in a crucial way the task of sensibility with the task of imagination, re-establishing the role of imaginary: «Imagination doesn’t add any imaginary to the real, but it makes the real grow up to imaginary, an imaginary that is still real and that end up unifying the real, instead of dispersing it» (Dufrenne 1967, 67).

However the crucial text for the idea of imaginary is the essay *L’imaginaire* published in 1976 in *Esthétique et philosophie*. In fact the author reinvents the concept connecting it to the idea of Nature. The imaginary becomes the means to access to an other dimension of the real, unbinding the human being from his representative relation with the world. Man – the philosopher claims –

is used to keep the world at a “safe representational distance”; on the contrary the strength of imaginary is to tell the world not as it is, but as it’s possible. So for the subject to transcend the real through the imaginary means walking the path of possibility and going toward an original dimension that appears in the punctuality of appearance.

In his last work, *L'œil et l'oreille* published in 1987, the imaginary dimension takes the definitive form of virtuality as the immanent imaginary of percept⁶. This notion is developed organically in the end of the text, but the principal aim of this work is to describe the experience involving all the senses: the synaesthetic experience.

So first of all virtual is conceived as something handy behind the immediate sense of the percept. Actually, we can't affirm with absolute certainty that the virtual is “behind the real”, because in this way we still indicate a too transcendental dimension. Dufrenne on the contrary wants to indicate the qualities of objects that we don't perceive immediately or consciously, as the other senses involved in perception we immediately don't consider, as hearing for instance. The title of this work suggest exactly this idea. The core of *L'œil et l'oreille* arises comparing the famous Merleau-Ponty text *Eye and Mind*; Dufrenne in a conference in honour of Merleau-Ponty affirms about this work: «A question remains about the title: the eye, yes, but why not the ear or the hand?» (Dufrenne 1981b, 101). Thus there are qualities that give form to our experience and characterize it unconsciously; for instance, the author claims: «the tactile and the auditory join the visible as virtual, without being heard and visualized for real» (Dufrenne 1987, 126). These qualities fill the real and lend depth to it.

The following question is to understand if the virtual is just a simple unconscious part of our experience or not. If it was, it wouldn't be so interesting. Dufrenne in fact makes another step and binds the virtual and imagination. Once again the author reaf-

⁶The term “virtuality” doesn't appear only in *L'œil et l'oreille*. Trace of the concept can be found starting from the *Phenomenology of aesthetic experience*, where in the chapter dedicated to the function of imagination the term of “virtual” is already present: «Imagination nourishes representation with modes of implicit knowledge [les savoirs] previously constituted in lived experience. More precisely, imagination plays a dual role. It mobilizes such knowledge, and it converts what is acquired by experience [l'acquis] into something visible. In the former case, we must consider knowledge as an aspect of imagination. For knowledge is a virtual state of the image, whose intentional correlate is the possible» (Dufrenne 1953, 348).

firms the duality of the imagination functions: on the one hand as creator of images and on the other as receptive faculty of a sense. As the first definition imagination is described as a synthetic and associative capacity able to create images. So starting from this idea it is something that has to do always with the sensible dimension: it is first of all an intentional relation with the object and in this way it is rooted in perception. This is the first bond between the virtual and imagination, in fact imagination as creator of images doesn't mean that imagination uses anarchically its own associative power, but that its function consists to «complete the given with the virtual and to correct the insecurity of a perception limited to a single sensorial range» (Dufrenne 1987, 123).

The second meaning the imagination assumes – the most important at this point of our reflection – is to *grasp* the virtual sense of the percept. So imagination, according to this function, becomes a mode of subject's intentionality, who is able to experience the world in a specific manner. Not just as a subject making associations that enrich the given, not just as a theoretical subject, but also as a capacity of *grasping* the virtual dimension of the given. By this way Dufrenne tries to describe an other mode to relate ourselves to the world: through the imagination we can open our experience to the virtual. In short, it is «the capacity of opening to what is not immediately perceived» (Dufrenne 1987, 197). This second notion of imagination is quite close to the idea of a “realising” imagination as Gaston Bachelard conceived it in his texts. The difference between dream (*rêve*) and reverie/daydream (*rêverie*) is central: the former is comparable to a fantastic and illusory dimension; the latter is also related to an imaginative dimension, but controlled and conscious. So the author recoups a more “docile and moderate” notion of imagination in line with the concept of *rêverie*, as elements that allow an imaginative valorisation of the immanent percept⁷.

At first glance virtuality seems to concern just the subject. It is indeed through and because of a subject that there is something unperceived and intertwined with the percept. On the one hand in fact it is necessary to have a subject to *build* a virtuality. Dufrenne

⁷ Gaston Bachelard philosophy is an other significant reference point in Dufrenne theory of imagination. The importance of this author emerges especially in his last works, but Bachelard doctrine is a fundamental element since his very starting formation as we deduce from the paper published in 1963 *Gaston Bachelard and the poetry of imagination* in *Les Etudes Philosophiques*, cfr. Dufrenne 1966, 174-187.

goes so far as to evoke a sort of sensible memory in the subject, as if the carnal body guards a memory of the virtual qualities of objects. For instance, when we perceive a scarf made by velvet, we have of course a visual perception of the velvet – we perceive the colour, the weft and so on – but we can figure its softness just because we have already touch it ones; so our perception is unconsciously enriched by this virtuality we have pre-experienced and that we conserve somehow. So from this point of view, one could claim that virtual is something the subject owns.

On the other hand, if the virtual is grasped by a subject, the object has to be populated by this virtuality. In this sense one has to recover the etymological meaning of the virtual: according to the latin word *vis*, the term states not just something that exists potentially, but properly the strength, the force owned by objects. Moreover the virtual in the object is also the unrealised possibilities the object has, it represents what it could be but isn't realized yet: this is the actual power of imaginary. It shows the other face of the real, its fullness. The imaginary is finally the element for finding again the possibility inside reality. The concern of Dufrenne's whole production was the difficulty to systematise and give a name at this dimension of sense, which is disclosed in the perceptual field. The imaginary, which is dangerously close to the nothingness and to the loss of sense, could be the way for finding a new possible way to speak about reality.

Thought the idea that the virtual is enclosed into the objects, one can understand how Dufrenne really bonds together the notion of the virtual and imaginary. If the faculty elected to perceive these qualities in objects is imagination, its natural correlate is an imaginary. So the virtual is «the immanent imaginary impregnating the percept» (Dufrenne 1987, 189). The two terms “virtual” and “imaginary” become interchangeable

and both label the correlate of the imagination operations that let this unperceived become a quasi-perceived. The concept of imaginary finally lost its fictional and irrational nature once and for all, because is no more the misguided product of imagination and neither something unreal, as Sartre states, but as the author affirms it is «what is pre-perceive in the shade of the perceived» (Dufrenne 1987, 193). Starting from this world one can talk about the virtual: it is still something rooted in it.

In the end, virtuality is a way to make us conscious about this dimension, this «pre-real, along which the Being arises before

being humanised» (Dufrenne 1976a, 203), allowing the subject – according to the author – to be near to the fullness of the originary. But only in the originary, in the Nature, the subject could experience himself as something not individualized yet and find anew the prenatal intimacy with the other. Yet this theory implies a sort of inner paradox: virtuality cannot ever become an explicit dimension. So the reflection around this concept can just elevate the subject in the vicinity of the originary, that is to postulate a necessary dimension of reality. Something of which the subject cannot ever be conscious. That's the limit and at the same time the peculiarity of Dufrenne's theory: he goes so far as to analyse the depth of human perception, but because he firmly wants to remain into a theory of experience, into the flesh of the world, he can just postulate a pre-real dimension that can't ever be visualized or touched. This is the real significance of the virtual: the invisible behind the visible, which human being can "just" imagine.

Dufrenne's philosophy, in particular the reflection about the functions of imagination, is surely influenced by its own age, crossed by the student protests of 1968, but it's something valuable also nowadays. Just fifty year ago streets were full of people trying to make a cultural and social revolution, but it feels like it was ages ago: «Imagination in power! The walls of May '68 cry out» (Dufrenne 1976b, 99). Conversely, to read the opening sentence of Calvino transmits to the reader a sense of oppression due to the boundaries imposed to the individual imagination nowadays. Yet the possibility to free oneself's imagination is embodied by the imagination itself: in a society overwhelmed by images, everyone's task could be to enter a reality where the possible actually inhabits and makes the possible come true. If imagination seems to have lost his power lying in the subject, we have to replace the role of imagination again, to re-establish its primate function as creative means and as a capacity to re-built a society that now doesn't leave any room to the individual process.

Imagination can be its own key to find a new possible in the reality, that is to imagine a different world: poets and scientists already know the productive power imagination could have. So human beings must have faith in all the dimensions that increase the imagination works: art, literature, philosophy. We have to recover a form of virtuality that doesn't put aside the subject (in the flesh) and his productive strength. We have to seek a virtuality embodying the desire of the human being to create a reality where he is

not overwhelmed by images; where the imaginary is not just a fancy but actually something that serves the real world, in order that it's not just an indirect imaginary – as Calvino claims – but an «utopian imaginary, which under the immediate impetus of the desire evokes (and sometime outlines) an other world» (Dufrenne 1976b, 125). Why recovering in 2018 such a faith in the potentiality of imagination couldn't heal our “civilisation of the image”?